DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 223 645 TM 820 726

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TITLE On the Compelling Need to Go beyond Minimum Competency.
PUB DATE 8 Jun 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual NAEP Conference on Large Scale Assessment (12th, Boulder, CO, June 8, 1982).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Competency Based Education; Educational Assessment; Educational Policy; Educational Principles; Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Needs; *Minimum Competencies; *Minimum Competency Testing; *State Standards; Teaching Methods; *Testing Problems

ABSTRACT

The essential meaninglessness of the phrase "Minimum Competency" is discussed and it is placed in the larger context of "The Basics." It is argued that "The Basics" as taught in preparation for minimum competency tests (MCT) are not basic either in the sense of being essential skills or enabling skills. Using research findings and common sense, arguments are presented for other skills as being more basic than the "3R's." Evidence is presented that the skills taught in preparation for MCTs are disconnected, are not general and do not generalize. Arguments are made that preparing children for MCTs forces teachers to use a didactic mode of teaching even more than usual and that this mode flies in the face of all that is known from child psychology about good environments for important learning. It is contended that because the skills do not generalize, minority groups who accept MCT programs are being lulled into a false sense of accomplishment and security and that the programs are thus racist in impact if not in intent in ways not contended by the plaintiffs in the case of Debra P. Education must be based on meaningful philosophy and a set of goals to be a sound instructional system. (Author/PN)

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ON THE COMPELLING NEED TO GO BEYOND MINIMUM COMPETENCY

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G. W. Bracey

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Delivered to the Twelfth Annual Conference
On Large Scale Assessment
Boulder, Colorado
June 8, 1982

I am both delighted and appalled at being here. Delighted to be back in Boulder and see old friends after a two year absence, appalled that this session could come to pass, should have been seen by others around the country as necessary.

You see, I still believe that Gene Glass was absolutely correct when in 1977 he had drafted a paper, published the following year in which he wrote:

> For most skills and performances, one can reasonably imagine a continuum stretching from "absence of skill" to "conspicuous excellence." But it does not follow from the ability to recognize the absence of the skill...that one can recognize the highest level of skill below which the person will not be able to succeed (in life, at the next level of schooling, or in his chosen trade)..Imagine that someone would dare specify the highest level of reading performance below which no person could succeed in life as a parent. Counter examples could be supplied in abundance of persons whose reading performance in below "minimal" level yet who are regarded as successful parents.

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The ludicrousness of the Minimum Competency Testing Movement has been satirized by Glenn Rowley in the Journal of Educational Measurement, Summer, 1982, in an article entitled "Historical Antecendents of the Standard-Setting Debate: An Inside Account of the Minimal Beardedness Controversy." Crowley's article is delightful reading to everyone except those of us who have wasted so much time dealing with the craziness of it all.

Happily, there appears to be a trend in Virginia and in Florida and perhaps across the nation to turn away from the fruitless concept of minimum competency to hopefully more meaningful conceptions of excellence. Indeed, at a meeting of the Directors of State Testing Programs on June 7, several references were made to "excellence". I am not wholly sanguine about this trend because, in Virginia at least, much of the rhetoric about excellence is expresed within a context of raising standards, tightening standards, and toughening standards. I have written elsewhere about the sometimes Calvinistic view that Virginians seem to have about their schools and it concerns me that some of this same tame-the-depravity thinking has contaminated discussions of excellence. It also appears to me that "excellence" is becoming a buzzword and a fuzzword often not denoting anything of substance. Still, even with those caveats, I think the tendency to look at excellence and quality is a healthy trend.

I must admit that even if this audience accepts that it is meaningless to talk about minimal skill - and I'm not certain how many in the audience accept that - there are many others who do not. Beverly Anderson, in her report to the National Consortium on Testing Conference in May, 1982, did not note any great trend away from this kind of program and, sad to say, we heard yesterday that several states were considering the adoption of such programs. So we must address why it is necessary to move beyond mininmums, and what is so bad about programs that are described as minimal competency programs.

What we must also do is talk about "basic" skills. Even if everyone could agree that minimum competency is not a meaningful psychological construct, I suspect there would still be divergence over the concept of "basic skills" which is a phrase often used synonomously with and instead of minimums. When they are used interchangeably they remain interchangeably meaningless and so we must ask if, when people use the term basic skills, they are speaking of anything meaningful. My answer is that it is possible to define basic skills in a meaningful way but that what passes for basic skills as customarily listed in objectives and what are customarily taught undere that rubric are not. People who talk about basic skills and back to basics usually do so in the context that there is an agreed upon set of skills that are fundamental to other skills and essential to survival in today's world. One of the speakers sharing this podium with me

today yesterday used the phrase "The Basics" leaving the impression that somewhere in her head there is a set of skills that define that domain. And I am fairly confident from earlier conversations with her that those basics are the "3R's". I will commit my heresy early: The "3R's" are not basic. They can be important, but they are not essential. I will provide evidence for this heresy later. "Essential" as customarily used is essentially meaningless. The people who use it seem not to comprehend it's meaning and often modify it with the words "very" or "most". There are no qualifiers for "essential". Something either is or isn't.

Here are some examples of the kinds of skills usually taught under the rubric of basics:

To get a dipolma in the State of Virginia, or to get an endorsed dipolma from the city of Detroit, children are required to learn how to multiply fractions. They are not required, to get a diploma, to know how to add, subtract, or divide fractions. Is the multiplication of fractions more basic than the other three operations? I doubt it. But what I don't doubt is that it is easier to teach by rote and to master. The other three operations are harder: Dividing fractions often involves a perceptual flip-flop that some children find difficult and addition and subtraction of fractions becomes more difficult when common denominators must be found. In Virginia the allowable range of denominators are the whole numbers 1-5; in Detroit it is 1-12. What is sufficiently basic in Virginia is not sufficiently basic in Detroit. But the "basic" question I have is: If children are really learning the algorithm for multiplying fractions, if they are really learning to comprehend the base 10 numbering system, why should these limitations be necessary?

Another real question is this: Why teach these skills at all? When, in a child's life other than at school and on obsolete tests are they going to have to multiply fractions? Never. Most calculations of fractional materials today are done by calculators using decimal fractions. In some areas of carpentry and automobile mechanics, I can see where, until we go completely metric, the knowledge of fractions might required, do not believe that the use of calculators to perform arithmetic operations will impair the development of understanding of mathematics concepts, but I am certain that doing page after page of workbook problems will impair such development. I might also point out

that if we were interested in teaching " basic" mathematics, we would spend much more time on base 2, octal and hexadecimal systems as these are important bases for many of today's jobs.

We teach multiplication of fractions because it is easier to teach than the other operations with fractions and because we have aways taught it. Never underestimate the power of inertia.

Florida, on the other hand does require the addition and subtraction of fractions with unlike denominators, but limits them to the numerals 2,3,4,5,6,8 and 10. What's wrong with 7 and 9?

A supermarket in Richmond, Virginia, recently installed a talking cash register. The operator's duties are simply to pass the food over the scanner. The cash register tells the customer what it is and what it costs. If there is a partial quantity, such as five limes which are 10 for a dollar, the operator enters this and the register reports out of the partial quantity. When the customer hands the operator money, the cash register dutifully announces the amount and the change due. The operator does have to do a number of things at the end to get the totals, to verify that the customer's check will not bounce and get the receipt out of the machine, but none of these operations requires any knowledge of arithmetical operations. It does require the ability to do a number of behavioral operations in sequence, which, I would recall to your attention, was one of the first tests used by Binet and which remains a part of most IQ tests.

I mention this not as a curiosity but as an example of an important fact: Whatever was basic may not be in the future.

This is an important point and let me provide another, more important example. Our office has acquired a number of word processors, computers with word processing packages and will soon have an optical character reader to take straight typing and place it on a word processor floppy disc ready for revision and editing. I and most of my staff are--dare I say--minimally competent to operate the word processors. A lot of times, the first time my secretary ever sees a text is when it is ready to be revised;

that is true of other secretaries as well. What are the secretaries doing? They are doing administrative tasks, number crunching, basic statistics, item development and, in at least one instance, acting as a research assistant. The point is that the distinctions between what is a "clerical" and what is a "professional" job are beginning to blur, a trend predicted by a number of futurists and accelerated by Xerox Corporation with its introduction of the "Star Professional Work Station." The skills "basic" to the various jobs will change.

The information technology revolution is changing our world, rendering it truly close to the "global village" predicted by McLuhan some years back. But our schools are teaching things that are already obsolete. It is as if we were in the time just after the invention of the Gutenberg press and our schools were still training students in penmanship for the purpose of copying manscripts and at the same time crying for more ink.

Back to the basic topic of this speech: There are other areas of mathematics - for example in Virginia children must know how to recognize parallel lines to get a high school diploma, but does not have to know anything about perpendicular lines, oblique lines -and believe me, they don't - that are equally non-essential, but I think I have belabored this point sufficiently. Some of the skills are arguably useful in life. None that I have seen is unequivocally essential.

If mathematics is a problem area - after all it is being affected by technology a lot - what about reading? Surely no one can say reading is not essential. Here I would agree again as I would have in math had the children been learning algorithms and understanding a number base, but a similar problem applies to reading as taught as a basic skill: Children are being overinstructed in a few teachable skills at the peril of true reading. Will anyone here defend to me the assertion that learning to decode the SCHWA sound in context is an [illegible]ial minimal basic skill? If so, please explain to me how children learned to read before phonics.

Many programs require students to read paragraphs and select from them the main idea. At the NIE clarification hearings mentioned earlier, this skill, extracting main idea from a paragraph, was presented as an enabling skill, allowing a child to go on to higher

levels such as discerning author's purpose. What do these paragraphs look like that enable the higher order skills? Well in Detroit and Virginia, they can't be any longer than 250 words; in Florida they can be no longer than 150 words and the main idea can be in the beginning, middle or end of the passage. With a passage that short, of course, the "main idea" ends up in one sentence. In general the passages are abbreviated, truncated, simplified, kiddified versions of what a child is going to encounter in the real world. With a maxmimum of 250 words, you can't help but often end up with a contrived artificial looking passage. Where will a child ever again find a passage that short at that reading level? Oftentimes they specify that one distractor is to be too broad in scope, one too narrow and the third contain factually incorrect information. Is this what a child will be doing later? No, a typical op-ed article, for example, runs about 900 words and requires, in addition to knowledge of the world around him, that the child be able, to use Jerry Bruner's phrase, "to go beyond the information given". Nowhere in in the lists of basic skills or minimum skills that I have seen are these crucial inferential skills mentioned. And I can find no way in which the skills taught as minimum enable the development of these higher order skills. I think you will be presented with evidence by Rex Brown that, in fact, basic skills instruction inhibits the development of higher order skills. If Rex doesn't, you can obtain such evidence from Richard Anderson at the Univesity of Illinois.

As if that weren't enough, think about the reading done to take a test and "real" reading for fun and profit. The two scarcely resemble one another. As Debby Meier has pointed out in her article in Dissent, 1981, when you know you're reading to take a test you start looking for key words or phrases that will be relevant to the questions. A decade earlier, Jim Herndon, in his marvelous book How to Survive In Your Native Land, made this same point. If you read an article you are likely to get a bad grade on a reading test precisely because you've been reading. I think the four page excerpt from this book that is an attachment to this speech makes that point abundantly clear.

The fact that literacy is not basic or a minimum skill is self evident to anyone old enough to have encountered old but wise illiterates who used to occur with some frequency in this country. I suspect that recognition of this fact was one factor in the Supreme Court's decision that struck down literacy tests as voting prerequisites.

Finally, in connection with reading, as illustrated by main idea paragraphs, is the sad fact that many children cannot even master the skill of selecting one choice out of four from a passage no longer than 250 words. If the entire competency test in Virginia, and I am certain that this would hold for other states and regions, were made up of main idea questions, we could not accomodate the number of failures. In Virginia, the p-value for this type of item is about 75% and for black students it is below 70. Yet, in 1981, 98% of first time takers passed the test. How? By racking up high scores on the easier parts of the test. There is absolutely no indication that they are learning any kind of enabling skill except perhaps some degree of testwiseness.

I wish to digress a moment here from the major thrust of the speech and illustrate once again that the "basics" whatever they might have been are changing. President Mitterand of France has established, in Paris, a World Computer Center. Jean Jacques Servan-Schreiber is the head, Nicholas Negroponte of MIT is the Executive Director and Seymour Papert, among others, is a Senior Scientist. The raison d'etre of this center is that Mitterand and the officers feel that the personal computer will be the mode of instruction for third world nations. By personal computer, they do not mean what is available currently under that phrase, but a computer, producible within a decade that will be no larger than a book, will have voice capabilities and, in Dr. Negroponte's words, will "closely simulate human interaction." They believe that such a computer will be essential as well, in developed countries to retrain the tens of millions of people who will soon lose their current jobs to robots. The advent of such technological power may well render schools as currently structured, totally obsolete. At the very least, it will signal a change in "The Basics." Already there are reports from pilot projects in Senegal that people can be trained, using computers, for skilled jobs without ever becoming "literate" or able to "compute" in the usual sense. If you're a traditional back to basics freak, that ought to rattle a few neurons.

An overlooked and crucial problem concerning "the basics," is the generalizability of the skills learned. As I mentioned earlier, the students in Virginia must know how to recognize parallel lines but don't need to recognize perpendicular lines, but there was a time when they did and some of the items written when they did, inadvertently were kept in our item bank and were given to one set of retakers, children who had taken the

test once but failed. They passed the parallel items at better than 90%, but the perpendicular items at something less than 45%. There is some curriculum deflection for all students, but for those who have once failed the test, the minimum competencies become the curriculum. What these skills will do in isolation for kids is a mystery to me.

The parallel/perpendicular data provides a little evidence that the skills don't generalize, but Tom Sticht, of the Human Resources Research Organization, reporting at the National Consortium on Testing Conference at its Spring, 1982 meeting, gave me more evidence on this than I could have hoped for. To give you all of Tom's report would itself take an hour so I will report only that part most salient to this forum. In a Department of Defense study, Tom took people who tested low on an NRT of reading. Then he did lots of things with these people. You can get away with this sort of thing in the military. He tried teaching general literacy skills. No improvement on the test. He then did a number of job analyses, and used available job related reding materials and taught specific literacies for specific jobs. Wonder of wonders! The scores on the specific literacy tests went up as did job performance. Scores on the NRT did not rise. Tom then discovered that his subjects had been given a whole battery of ability tests so the Army would know what training would be most suitable. Devious Sticht took recruits with low ability in certain areas and gave them reading tests in those areas. The scores on these tests were lower than on the general NRT. We tend to think that reading by any other name is still "reading." It would seem that it is not--there is no "reading" without knowledge.

What happens during the course of schooling? Schools teach "reading" as a subject but they also teach math literacy as part of math, and science literacy as part of science and social studies literacy and poetry literacy and so on. The grammar and syntax of these specific literacies vary somewhat. In the course of X years of school it is possible that these literacies fuse and maybe even become abstracted in the way that Harry Harlow talked about abstracted learning sets 30 years ago or become the "g" factor that Thurstone argued for even earlier. Most children become able to read most passages that they encounter more or less well because they've encountered so many different kinds of passages, but I would bet that if you constructed two tests of equal difficulty

as indicated by readability, syntax, grammar, item specifications, etc., but varied the degree of familiarity that the child had with the subject matter, scores would vary in the same direction. Of course, this is never done because of the way NRTs are constructed. Those of you who read the Scientific American, a magazine for that mythical being, the "educated layman," will immediately intuit this truth. Can you read an article on quantum physics with the same speed and comprehension as one on test utilization?

In teaching "the basics" we don't ask "What is this basic to?" The schools can't really answer that because of the indeterminacy of the child's life after grade 12 and so they teach a lot of things, most of which they've been teaching forever, and hope for the best. For those kids who are having trouble with things called MCTs something has gone wrong; the teaching, if it occurred, didn't "take." Taking these kids and teaching them narrow discrete skills, specific literacies, will not correct this problem. It's as if a kid doesn't know how to play baseball and you hope that by teaching him how many balls give you a walk and when to make a sacrifice bunt he will get the Gestalt of the whole game. It won't work; you'll strike out.

Most of the truly basic skills are probably not teachable. Let me just note in passing that the typical method of instruction for basic skills flies in the face of all that we know from developmental psychology, particularly the work flowing from Piaget. Listening and speaking are probably more basic; convergent and divergent thinking; tactical and strategic thinking. None of these are being taught as basic skills and none of the skills being taught are in any way that I can see enabling of these skills. The kinds of skills that seem to me most basic cannot be taught by a teacher in front of a class. They can only be taught by those magical persons (and maybe now machines using languages like LOGO) who know how to arrange an environment that will maximize the probability that the kids will learn. The basics, as currently taught, force teachers to regress even more than usual into an ineffectual didactic mode of teaching. And I am terrified that the Court's decision upcoming in Florida, a decision that may formalize a national standard of what constitutes curricular and instructional validity, will absolutely force the teacher into more didactic presentations at the risk of educational malpractice suits if she doesn't demonstrate using of this teaching mode.

One thing a didactic mode of teaching does, by the way, is to teach you, the recipient of such teaching, to be dependent on a teacher. That is not, in theory, what schools are supposed to be doing. (I realize that this is not true using the denotative definition of the word "didactic," but its common connotative meaning implies a direct, lecture format).

Of course we do not, with the exception of writing, assess whether or not the students can actually perform the skill, but only if he has acquired enough testwiseness to pick one of four or five selections.

Let me mention this in passing: We are headed into an audiovisual world where the printed word will be less important than it has been to date, but even if we weren't the teaching of reading for minimum skills programs is absurd. Kids who can read won't have any trouble with the test, while kids who have trouble with the test will not learn how to read. It is crazy to expect that a child who has spent 10 or so years in school and has trouble reading, is going to learn much now, an in an environment defined as "school," or, more importantly, that he is going to seek out a "career path" that requires a lot of reading.

I must state a worry that I have about the acceptance by the black community in Virginia of this kind of program and, by and large even in Florida. Diana Pullin and I were talking about this not too long ago and I was expressing the concerns I've just expressed here and she admitted that the skills taught for Florida's MCT would probably become the curriculum for pupils like her clients but felt they would say that is so much more than they were getting. Is it? I am concerned that at last year's Virginia Testing Conference after I reported on the NIE clarification hearings and what I had said there that a black colleague of mine came up to me and said "Now that you've found a test that black people can pass, you want to do away with it." My concern was not personal-the barb was not aimed at me. My concern is that that the black community, and other minority communities are being lulled into a false sense of achievement and security; that they are being set up once again. The programs may thus turn out to be racist in impact no matter how well intended they were at their conception.

To describe a solution to this would take us the rest of this conference so I will say only that the solution to this problem is an application of the solution to any educational problem. Only the specifics differ. Education is always in hot water. Why? In part, because it is subject to fads. Why is it subject to fads? Because it is not based on a sound instructional system. And what would that consist of? In general, a sound system must have a meaningful philosophy and a set of goals. Because this implies value it is unlikely to occur in our culturally pluralistic society in the absence of some kind of voucher system. It must also have paid attention to epistemology, to the structure of knowledge. Then it must, as Piaget did when he became interested in epistemology, concern itself with the development of knowledge, with developmental psychology. Then and only then can it concern itelf with "pedagogy" which would mean the application of psychology and epistemology to curriculum and instruction in the service of the goals and philosophy. Education is subject to fads because educators go in and tinker with curriculum and instruction without paying attention to these earlier, more basic if you will, disciplines.* Far out, you say? Maybe, but I am convinced that without such attention, public education, basics and all is going down the tubes.

Minimum competency programs have wasted millions of hours of instruction and millions of dollars, maybe even billions. And for what? Have we learned anything at all? Jim Popham defended MCT programs on the grounds that they were new and we didn't know how they would work and that we shouldn't stop. It was, he said, as if we want to halt work on airplanes in the early 1900s just because the existing models were primitive. It was pointed out that while that might be true, those models were not used for mass transportation. We are experimenting with millions of children's lives with these programs. And the casualty rate is too high to bear.

*(For the structure of this line of reasoning, I am indebted to Lawrence P. Creeden, Superintendent of Schools, Quincy, Massachusetts.[1])

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Finally Arpine and Eileen knew by this time that the careful grouping, which had in fact caused us all a lot of trouble and time arranging schedules, was a complete failure in terms of its goal, leaving aside whether or not the goal was a good idea in the first place. With all, it was now clear that among say eight kids all supposed to be reading at 4.5-4.8 reading level, making errors A, B and D (but not C), there were in fact eight kids some of whom were reading all kinds of stuff, some who would only read the newspaper, some who would only read Mad magazine (or look at it anyway) and some who wouldn't read anything at all. Thus the test could only mean something if you never looked at the kids themselves. Once you did, you had to abandon it. It was a good lesson and I recommend it.

I suppose the point has been made—try to get hold of everything at all relevant to what you are going to do and see what's there. It sounds obvious, but in my experience few teachers do it, or even consider it. In fact, almost none of these books and ideas and materials contained anything useful at all and we speedily threw them away and forgot almost all of it. What remained of this investigation were odd bits of knowledge (clues to reading problems, occasional things to try with a kid who didn't seem to be getting anywhere) which could be usefully pulled out anytime, most of which we could have remembered ourselves from our own childhood, I think . . . but it was the investigation that was important to us all, for two reasons. First, we knew we had done all that bull shit—we knew that the standard methodologies of "teaching reading" were pitifully irrelevant at best to that goal. Second, the investigation itself was a basis for our own solidarity. We were deciding to read all that stuff, we were deciding to figure out (if we could) what we were doing, we decided to abandon most of what we came across and that was

important in a place where the people most directly concerned with children decide almost nothing about what they are going to do with them.

In the end—but that's wrong; there was never any end to it, for in our new situations now we still seek each other out to talk about kids and what's happening with so-and-so and who liked this book and . . . so, as the year went on we came to our own simple conclusions which were not anything strikingly original, to say the least, which we came to imagine everyone knew, which had been stated in many ways by people a long time ago and were being said by people right now, but which were ours, and we could state them (and more important feel right with them) and put them to use and do them, and that not in a free school or anything else but in a goddamn public American junior high right here and now.

Briefly, we just knew it was absurd that a normal O.K. American kid of any class or kind of twelve years old shouldn't be able to read. Why was it? Because reading is not difficult, Anyone can do it. It is an activity which no one seems to be able to explain but which everyone can do if given a chance. It is simple for people to do. If you know enough to tie your shoe and come in out of the rain, you can do it.

If you can't do it, you must have been prevented from doing it. Most likely what prevented you was teaching. For one thing, if you have to get taught the same "skills" for seven years over and over again, you probably get the notion that it is very difficult indeed. But more important, the "skill" involved in reading is at once very simple and quite mysterious. Once you can look at C-A-T and get the notion that it is a clue to a certain sound, and moreover that very sound which you already know means that particular animal, then you can read, and that is certainly quite simple, even if the ability of humans to do this is opaque. What you probably need to do then is to read a lot and thereby get better at it, and very likely that's what you will do, again, if no one stops you. What stops you is people teaching

you skills and calling those skills "reading," which they are not, and giving you no time to actually read in the school without interruption.

That, basically, seemed what was wrong with everything we had investigated. With the tests, with the "methods," with the class structures, with the teacher's determination to teach . . . that no one had ever had much time in school to just read the damn books. They were always practicing up to read, and the practice itself was so unnecessary, or so difficult, or so boring you were likely to figure that the task you were practicing for must combine those qualities and so reject it or be afraid of it.

I think of a normal reading class, as it was when I was in school, as it is in my own school, as it is in most schools. What goes on? The bell rings. Roll taking, admin tasks, demands for order. Speeches from the teacher, motivating the kids to read. Perhaps fifteen minutes' worth of that. Then an assignment or a few assignments figuring that the teacher has "grouped" the kids. The kids get out the reading textbooks. Five minutes more to find the book, find the page, complain about the dumb story and ask about do we have to read this? About the time the kids are looking at the title or reading the first paragraph (or not-doing either) out comes the ditto sheet containing the real assignment—questions on the reading. Who has red hair? Why didn't the man stop after he ran over the puppy? Why did the kid ride the rocking horse? Give your opinion. Summarize the action. Who are your favorite characters? What would you have done? Or the teacher writes the questions on the board (if she has read the story herself) or tells the kids which questions to do out of the back of the book. Either way, there are twenty minutes left in the reading period and all the kids immediately stop reading the story because they know that what is important to the teacher is that they answer them questions. Naturally the teacher gives out the questions so she can check up on who read the story and who didn't; everyone then forgets that it is these same questions which have just prevented everyone from reading the story. You watch the kids stop reading and start flipping through the pages looking for the answers to the

questions. Find the word red and near it the word Johnny and there you have the answer to question I; Johnny has red hair.

Take a look at the Oral Reading Test. Take a look at the textbook methods for Teaching Reading. Look at the books themselves. None of it is about people reading books or newspapers or magazines, but instead about Reading Comprehension. So you have short paragraphs, beginning out of nowhere and ending in the middle of nowhere, and the only reason you would ever look at the paragraph is if you have to answer the questions. The Reading Test resembles nothing else called a book; no one would look at it and think it something to read. It is full of short bursts of print, surrounded by arrows and staccato headlines adjuring you Read! Think About! Widen Your Interest! A New You! and full of red-outlined boxes with print inside them and color photos and questions about every bloody thing. Does that look like a book which you might find on a shelf or in the drugstore and look through or decide to take or read? So that even if this piece of shit does contain "The Rocking Horse Winner" or a thousand stories you might actually like, you ain't going to read it. Or if you are just reading everything in sight like quite a few kids, then in your determination to actually read the story just as if you were reading something, you won't have time for the questions, which will by the way seem even more stupefying if you've read the story and liked it, and you find yourself getting a bad grade in Reading, precisely because you've been reading.